



INFORMAL FALLACIES

Formal vs Informal Fallacies
6 Fallacies of Irrelevance

FALLACIES

- Fallacies are errors in reasoning. Some fallacies are common and can be psychologically persuasive.
- An argument involves a formal fallacy if it is invalid because of its form: e.g denying the antecedent:
 - 1) If Gore is president, a Democrat is president.
 - 2) Gore is not president
 - So, 3) A Democrat is not President



FALLACIES

As we've seen, this argument is invalid because of its invalid form:

1) If P then Q

2) not P

So, 3) not Q

- Informal fallacies are not formal fallacies.
- They are arguments which are bad, but because of their *content*, not their form.



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1. ARGUMENT AGAINST THE PERSON (AD HOMINEM)

- Ad hominem fallacies attempt to discredit an argument by discrediting the arguer.
- There are three types
 - Ad hominem Abusive
 - Ad hominem Circumstantial
 - Tu quoque (“you too”)



EXAMPLE

Hunter S. Thomson argued in favor of legalizing drugs, but Thomson was a no-good dope-smoker, so clearly his arguments were no good.

- This passage doesn't address Thomson's arguments. Even if Thomson was a 'no-good, dope smoker', it doesn't follow that his argument is no good, or that his conclusion is false.



1A. AD HOMINEM ABUSIVE

- The general pattern here is something like:

1) A argued that P

2) A is an idiot...

So, 3) not P (or) A's argument is no good.

Note though that facts about a person's character can be relevant in arguments. For example:

Brown claims that he saw Jones kill Smith. But Brown is a pathological liar, and will greatly benefit if Jones goes to prison, so we shouldn't accept his testimony.



AD HOMINEM ABUSIVE

- Also note that sometimes someone will argue that someone is stupid, immoral, or whatever. This may not be nice, but it isn't a fallacy.
- For example, Al Franken wrote a book called Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot. This isn't fallacious, although it would be if he goes on to claim that we should therefore dismiss Limbaugh's views and arguments.



1B. AD HOMINEM CIRCUMSTANTIAL

- An ad hominem circumstantial fallacy attempts to discredit an argument by pointing out some fact about the arguer's circumstances which are in fact irrelevant to their argument.



EXAMPLE

- Ms. Fitch argues in favor of equal pay for equal work. She says it doesn't make sense to pay a person more for doing the same job just because he is male or Caucasian. But she would say that, wouldn't she?
- The implied conclusion here is that Ms. Fitch's argument is no good, since she stands to gain if its conclusion is accepted. But whether or not Ms. Fitch stands to gain from the conclusion is irrelevant to whether her premises are true and support her conclusion.



1.C TU QUOQUE (YOU TOO!)

- Example:

Dad says you shouldn't smoke, but that's ridiculous. That hypocrite smokes two packs a day!

The argument here is something like:

1) Dad says that you shouldn't smoke

2) He smokes

So, 3) He's wrong that you shouldn't smoke

But even though he doesn't take his own advice, it might still be good advice – in particular, he might still have a good argument that you shouldn't smoke.



ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Gore argues that we ought to reduce our carbon emissions. But that hypocrite flies around in his own private jet! So something is wrong with his argument.



2. STRAW MAN FALLACY



STRAW MAN FALLACY

- This fallacy occurs when someone argues attacks a misrepresentation of a view or argument, and then claims to have defeated the (genuine) view or argument in question.

Premises: A misrepresentation of the view is false.
Conclusion: The view itself is false.



STRAW MAN EXAMPLE

- The Senator advocates increased Social Security benefits for the poor. But this is just socialism, which was tried for years in Eastern Europe and failed miserably. So of course we shouldn't go along with the Senator's proposal.
- But even if this is a good argument against socialism, the Senator is hardly advocating socialism, so the argument does nothing to show that the Senator's proposal is a bad idea.



- Note that the Straw Man Fallacy involves a violation of the principle that we should be fair and charitable in interpreting arguments.
- In the previous example, the claim that the Senator is advocating socialism is unlikely to be fair to his intentions.



STRAW MAN EXAMPLE

Cynthia thinks that humans evolved through natural selection. But her view just can not be right. Evolutionary theory has it that complex creatures spontaneously arise out of pond scum and that there is no objective morality because we are all just brutes. These claims are ludicrous.



3. APPEAL TO FORCE



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- An appeal to force occurs when someone defends a conclusion by threatening anyone who doesn't accept it.

Premises: You can avoid harm by accepting this statement.
Conclusion: This statement is true.



EXAMPLES

You want to keep your head, so I suggest you renounce your belief in your deity and promote mine instead.

Secretary to boss: I deserve a raise – after all, you wouldn't want your wife to find out what you've really been up to during those 'late nights at the office'.

In neither case is the threat relevant to the truth of the conclusion.



4. APPEAL TO THE PEOPLE



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- An appeal to the people attempts to convince you of something by claiming that you'll be accepted or valued if you believe it.

Premises: You will be accepted or valued if you believe this statement.

Conclusion: This statement is true.



EXAMPLE

You don't seriously think that Bush and Blair ever really thought that Iraq posed a threat do you?
Anyone who knows anything at all knows that it was always just about oil.

Here the arguer is trying to get you to go along with what 'anyone who knows anything' thinks, but is not providing any argument for his conclusion.



ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Tom Cruise, Katie Holmes, John Travolta: the beautiful people of Hollywood are all scientologists. Don't you want to be one too?

The arguer tries to convince you of something by associating it with some desirable trait which is really irrelevant to the truth of his conclusion. This fallacy commonly occurs in commercials.



5. APPEAL TO PITY



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- An appeal to pity is an attempt to support a conclusion merely by evoking pity in one's audience *when the statements that evoke the pity are logically unrelated to the conclusion.*

Premises: You have reason to pity this person (or group).

Conclusion: You should do X for this person (or group), though doing X is not called for by the reasons provided.



EXAMPLE

Gee Professor, I really think you should give me a better grade in this class. I really need a C to graduate, and I've had a really rough quarter – my girlfriend broke up with me, my Xbox 360 was stolen, and my dog died. It's just been really tough all round.



Here the arguer is not offering good reasons to think that he deserves a better grade. He's trying to make the Professor feel sorry for him, and raise his grade because of that.



APPEAL TO PITY

- Note that sometimes the bad circumstances an arguer describes are relevant to the conclusion. Consider this passage from PETA to GW Bush re: Bush's beaver hat:

Body-gripping traps used to kill beavers cause them immeasurable suffering. In many cases, the traps fail to catch on target. If the traps do not kill the beavers immediately, they drown slowly, suffering for an excruciating 20 minutes while their family stands by helplessly. Death by drowning is extremely cruel – even the American Veterinary Medical Association condemns it – and such torturous treatment of a dog or cat would merit charges of cruelty to animals.



APPEAL TO PITY

- The previous passage isn't fallacious because the author is arguing that the methods in which beavers are killed so that their fur can be made into hats is cruel. In order to that she must cite facts about what happens when beavers are killed. These facts may evoke pity, but they are relevant to the conclusion being argued for.



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6. APPEAL TO IGNORANCE

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- An appeal to ignorance claims either:
 - (a) That something is true, on the grounds that no-one has proven it false, or
 - (b) That something is false, on the grounds that no-one has proven it true.

Premises: This statement has not been proven false.

Conclusion: So, this statement is true.

Premises: This statement has not been proven true.

Conclusion: So, this statement is false.



EXAMPLES

Of course God doesn't exist. After all, people – including some of the greatest minds in history – have been trying to prove His existence for centuries, and no-one has succeeded.

or

Of course God exists. After all, people – including some of the greatest minds in history – have been trying to prove that He doesn't exist for centuries, and no-one has succeeded.

